Election Day Registration: a ground-level view

What Local Election Officials Have Learned About Letting Americans Register and Vote on the Same Day

- » **Is EDR a burden to administer?**
- » **Does it make elections more expensive?**
- » **Does it cause confusion at the polls?**
- » **Does it encourage fraud?**

Background

Maine, Minnesota and Wisconsin adopted the practice of Election Day Registration (known as EDR) in the early 1970s. After a two-decade lull in reform activity, Wyoming, New Hampshire and Idaho passed EDR laws in the early '90s.

We are now seeing a third wave of interest in EDR. Montana approved an EDR law in June 2006. Iowa followed in April 2007. In July 2007, North Carolina enacted a "same day registration" law which allows registration and voting at the state's early voting sites (open from 19 to three days before an election), though not on Election Day. During the 2007 legislative session 23 states considered EDR or same day registration measures.

Dēmos' Survey of Election Officials in EDR States

Election Day Registration draws more people into the political process. In the 2006 midterm elections, EDR states achieved, on average, a 10 percent edge in voter turnout over other states. In most states, EDR is likely to increase turnout by about 5 percentage points, researchers project. EDR can be particularly effective at raising turnout among young adults, newly naturalized citizens, people of color, and those with lower incomes and levels of educational achievement. But while the benefits are clear and well-documented, opponents claim that they come at a steep price—in administrative complexity, implementation cost, and the potential for error or fraud.

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To assess the validity of these assertions, Dēmos conducted a telephone survey of local election officials in the EDR states of Idaho, Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Wisconsin and Wyoming. The interviews took place from February through April 2007. (Montana, which first implemented EDR in 2006, was excluded because of its limited experience.) The jurisdictions ranged widely in median household income (from $25,000 to $66,000) and population (from under 600 to over 500,000 residents). We were careful to include areas with substantial college populations, in order to reflect concerns about an unusually mobile subset of voters.

Most of the officials surveyed were town, city or county clerks for whom election administration was often just one of multiple responsibilities. In a few comparatively large jurisdictions, the respondents were full-time election administrators. In all, 49 officials took part. They were asked a variety of questions concerning the administration of EDR, its cost, and the integrity of election results. Here is a summary of what they said.

Does EDR Create Unreasonable Burdens for Election Administrators?

In non-EDR states, election officials often express opposition to EDR, arguing that it will make their jobs much more difficult. Based on the survey results, those fears are rarely borne out by experience. About one-third of the respondents characterized the workload impact as modest or marginal. The other two-thirds agreed that the impact was significant, but with very few exceptions they spoke about it in a matter-of-fact rather than a complaining way.

"Naturally, it's more difficult," said the clerk of a small city in Maine.

"It's not bad—it's just the way it is," said the clerk of a comparable-sized community in Minnesota.

A number of officials brought up compensating benefits. While EDR creates more work on Election Day itself, about half the survey respondents suggested that it had reduced or eliminated the familiar pattern (in non-EDR states) of a pre-deadline surge of registrations. Twenty-four of the 49 respondents said they had not been experiencing such a surge in their jurisdictions; of these, 19 gave EDR a share of the credit.

How are polling places organized in EDR states?

In 40 of the 49 jurisdictions, EDR voters are directed to a separate line or table to fill out a registration form and have their identities and eligibility checked. Once they have completed this process, they join other voters waiting to cast their ballots.

In three rural jurisdictions, EDR voters go directly to the same table with other voters. "As few as we are, it's not a problem," said the deputy clerk of one Idaho county (pop. roughly 1,000). A few jurisdictions use both arrangements—separate tables in high-turnout elections and a common table in low-turnout elections.

Is EDR Expensive to Implement?

Most of the respondents described the incremental cost of EDR as minimal. One Idaho election administrator, whose service predated her state's adoption of EDR in 1993, said she could not recall any rise in election expenses at the time.

The costs (where cited) were mainly those of training and deploying additional staff—more poll workers or election judges on Election Day and/or more clerical workers in the post-election period to add the new names and data to the permanent voter rolls.

The deputy clerk of a mid-sized New Hampshire city said that EDR required one or two extra registrars per polling place (at $15 an hour or $125 a day). The clerk of one of Maine's largest jurisdictions put the Election Day price tag at $3,900. "EDR is great, because procrastinators can still vote," she added. "It makes elections a little more expensive, but it's worth it."

In a New Hampshire community of 23,000 people, the city clerk estimated the post-election cost at about $1,700—or 10 hours a week of service over 14 weeks on the part of a worker earning $12 an hour. In Idaho, the elections administrator of a county with a population of about 50,000 projected one or two extra persons working full-time for a week and a half. A Wisconsin official in a municipality of about 70,000 spoke of spending about $5,000 on temporary workers to process EDR registrants after the November 2006 election.

But the overall effect, a number of respondents indicated, was not to add work or expense, but merely to shift the cost burden from one time and place to another. As a result of EDR, the elections manager of a college community in Minnesota said he ends up spending more money on election judges at the polls, and less money on in-house staff or temp workers at the office. (At least in his jurisdiction, he added, there is a net savings in the end, because the election judges are paid $8 to $9 an hour, while the in-house staff or temp workers earn $11 to $12 an hour.)

Can EDR Be Implemented at The Polls Without Confusion?

The overwhelming majority of respondents reported no confusion at polling places because of Election Day Registration—a concern sometimes raised by EDR opponents. A Minnesota official noted that EDR voters occasionally resent being asked for identification, especially in small communities "where everybody knows everybody."

> "EDR is great, because procrastinators can still vote."
>
> -the clerk in one of Maine's largest counties

Some of the most frequently-asked questions on Election Day involve the documents required for EDR, an official of a Minnesota city (pop. 85,000) reported. EDR voters

will sometimes complain about being asked to wait in line twice, a Wisconsin official said. Regular voters, the same official added, may be miffed when they see EDR voters being funneled into special express lines—a practice followed in a few jurisdictions.

Several officials said that EDR had helped defuse confrontations with voters whose names turn out to be missing from the registration lists. Without EDR, "we'd have a lot of unhappy people" at the polls, said the clerk of a New Hampshire town of 30,000.

Election Day Registration makes things harder for election workers but easier for voters—that was the overall judgment of a number of respondents. But one Idaho official, after initially answering in those terms, corrected herself: In the end, she said, EDR makes Election Day go more smoothly for both parties—the election workers are happier because the voters are.

Does EDR Lead to Voter Fraud?

Fraud has been the subject of the most potent criticisms of EDR. In our survey, it was also the question that elicited the clearest and most reassuring responses. Just one of 49 respondents suggested a link between EDR and an increased likelihood of vote fraud. (This official, the clerk of a Wisconsin town of fewer than 9,000 people, was also unique in expressing emphatic opposition to EDR.)

By contrast, the great majority of respondents rated current fraud-prevention measures sufficient to protect the integrity of elections. This was the prevailing view in large and small jurisdictions, and also in college communities, including one Idaho city where, in 2006, some 5,000 out of a total 26,000 to 27,000 voters used EDR.

> An election administrator in a populous Minnesota jurisdiction has never seen an organized attempt at mass voter fraud in his 22 years on the job.

Asked if they could recall any cases of fraud involving EDR voters, 40 of the 49 officials in our survey answered with a flat-out "no." A Maine election worker could not remember a single case of voter fraud in the state since the introduction of EDR in 1973. Several clerks recalled isolated allegations of voter misconduct involving false addresses or students at college campuses. It was unclear whether any resulted in criminal charges or convictions.

Most respondents indicated that they did not see fraud as a serious problem, with or without regard to EDR. An election administrator in one populous Minnesota jurisdiction said that in 22 years on the job, he had not seen a single attempt to commit mass voter fraud.

A number of respondents took the position that EDR had actually reduced the risk of fraud. Several agreed with the deputy town clerk in New Hampshire who said that her staff could process voter registrations with greater accuracy after Election Day than in the hectic pre-Election Day period, when the labor was more likely to be performed by temp workers or by in-house staff working overtime.

In the years before EDR, an Idaho official recalled, her office had relied on untrained staff from another agency to process last-minute registrations, resulting in many errors. EDR, she said, had made it possible to use trained personnel to do this work in a less pressured atmosphere after Election Day, allowing for much cleaner records.

Conclusion

Opponents have depicted Election Day Registration as an administrative nightmare and an invitation to fraud. This alarmist picture turns out to bear little relation to the experience of local election officials in EDR states. The great majority of the officials we surveyed said they had been able to handle EDR in an efficient and orderly way without much—if any—added expense. Virtually all expressed confidence in existing anti-fraud measures, and none could cite even a single clear case of EDR-abetted fraud. Several pointed to ways in which EDR might actually improve election security in the long term.

Throughout our national history, Americans have faced legal and procedural barriers to the exercise of their fundamental democratic rights. Today, as in earlier periods, many concerned Americans and voting rights advocates are looking for ways to clear away the obstacles and make it easier for all citizens to vote. EDR has a track record of doing exactly that. Without producing the problems cited by its critics, EDR increases political participation and holds the promise of creating an electorate that better reflects the composition of the country as a whole.

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